

To,

Oct 14, 2015

Instructional Quality Commission,
History-Social Science SMC
c/o Thomas Adams, Executive Director
1430 N Street, Suite 3207
Sacramento, CA 95814

Subject: Understanding the Hindu social structure.

'Caste' in large part was the complaint in my letter to the Commission on 'Portrayal of Hinduism in 6th grade" for which I have collected well over 2500 signatories and given enough in-person testimonies of bullying and abuse faced by our children due to insensitive and incorrect portrayal in the framework. I am disappointed to note that in the revised draft you have increased portions with incorrect and negative portrayal of Hinduism - specifically 'Caste' and Aryan invasion. I shall send separately a list of specific edits for your revised draft of the framework.

In this communication, my attempt is to paint a picture, to explain and educate the commission (and through this public process, the other parts of our education system such as textbook publishers and teachers) on the very sophisticated and complex Hindu social structure from a Hindu perspective and make a case explaining its misrepresentation in the revised draft. The impact of the revised narrative is that of all the religions only Hinduism is singled out for a portrayal based on interpretations that are entirely foreign to it, from view of those that are ignorant or try to vilify her, while all other religions are presented with generous interpretations from the perspective of those that practice it.

The problem, simply put remains that Hinduism is singled out for an absurd portrayal from an exclusively outsiders perspective – from a white Euro-Christian perspective. We Hindus are objectified, sensationalized, vilified and degraded, while European and Abrahamic cultures are humanized.

My recommendation is that you either do justice in fairly portraying the Hindu social structure for it was, or drop it entirely. An orientalist, reductionist, absurd portrayal is unacceptable. For the 6th grade level and for introduction to Hinduism the focus should not be on the Hindu caste structure as it takes at least High-School to develop the sensibilities and other knowledge based foundation to understand this. Also children deserve an introduction to Hinduism for what it is, without unfairly being associated with any social problems, as if they were problems of the religion. For instance, slavery and colonization are not presented as aspects of Abrahamic religion, even though they were based upon an Abrahamic religious claim of being chosen people or the 'only correct' religion or a right to dominion.

I do understand the difficulty the IQC faces, traditionally in the west the period before 300CE is seen through European goggles as a primitive pre-medieval period with primitive concepts of social freedom and a factual, accurate narrative for Hindu history does not fit that stereotype notion because the Vedic period in India was in fact a period of great

advancements in science, technology as well as philosophy, social structures and individual freedom and rights.

To take a specific example, the framework narrative talks about a Hindu “Caste” system. Now, “Caste”, is in fact a European construct – taken from Portuguese word *casta* which is used to refer to color or breed of cattle!! **Caste as explained in the textbooks, as also in your revised draft framework, has no basis in any of the Hindu scriptures.** Why this illogical obsession to look at the oldest and still living civilization on the planet in such a ridiculous and condescending way? This is simply un-American.

The Hindu social structure is a highly sophisticated, evolved and a complex system of वर्ण *varṇa*, आश्रम *āśrama* and जाती *jātī* in addition to government officials. वर्ण *varṇa* is in fact a category based upon mental, intellectual and spiritual makeup of a person while आश्रम *āśrama* is stage of life and जाती *jātī* is most closely related to family traditions and tends to be hereditary, because that is after-all how family traditions are passed down. Jati is sometimes perceived to be tied to occupations in life to some extent, because occupation or a group of occupations tended to be a family tradition in that era.

This sophisticated system is simply not appropriate for 6th grade and deserves to be understood at high-school level. The British tried over a century to document and map the Jati system to Varna and failed. Too sophisticated for entire British Empire is also too sophisticated for 6th graders to get their heads around.

The **necessary pre-requisites to understand the Hindu social structure** are the following which 6th graders simply do not have:

1. An understanding of the goals or objectives of Hindu life. These are called चतुर्विध *caturvidha* पुरुषार्थ *puruṣārth*. They are: धर्म *dharma*, अर्थ *artha*, काम *kāma*, and मोक्ष *mokṣa*. Each a complex topic in itself. The social structure in a planned out civilization would be a solution to some objective. Goals which any civilization tries to enable for all its citizens, becomes a defining trait of the civilization. Social structure needs to be studied in this context. Vedic civilization presents an inherent inconvenience to the Eurocentric narrative that wants to paint a picture of this era being primitive nomadic tribes of hunter gatherers who started banding together not in any particularly planned way. Seen in the right light, we might find there are brilliant sophisticated solutions in Vedic society that could even apply to our present day problems.
2. A good functional understanding of the principle of Rebirth. The Hindu principle of rebirth, by-the-way, has pretty much zero similarity to the absurd foreign portrayal of rebirth made in most textbooks.
3. Understanding that there is a diversity of human वासना *vāsanā* or the inherent diverse spectrum of human desires.

4. Principle of कर्म karma or taking responsibility for personal action.
5. अध्यात्म विद्या adhyātma vidyā or understanding the constant laws of nature through which everyone in the world is interconnected. A practical understanding of these laws is the foundation of Hinduism. Foundation of Hinduism is not a dogma or a doctrine that demands blind obedience.

I hope you shall redo the section on caste to be in line with California state standards on social content. The present portrayal is an orientalist, reductionist view portraying the Hindu social structure as a primitive or an oppressive system and is hence absolutely unacceptable as it is in violation of the Laws and the very spirit of the USA and a violation of the California standards for social content as well.

Jati (जाती jāṭī) is not unlike what existed all over the world including in medieval Europe and even in the present day America to some extent. A Cartwright is family of wagon wheel makers, and Baker is from a Baking family, US has military families today and political dynasties is becoming a contemporary reality. Also silicon-valley where I live is home to increasing Jati of entrepreneurs, or tech professionals who hang out with more of their kind to fuel creativity and benefit from supportive eco-system. Their children have early exposure to technology are hence comfortable with it. To use wordings from your narrative on Jati, industry networking groups such as IEEE or TiE, would be described as an oppressive caste system designed to prohibit people who are not members of their exclusive club, group or profession from mingling with each other. This kind of portrayal is ridiculous and absurd.

Family traditions, lifestyles and to a lesser extent occupations are the defining criteria of Jati and obviously they tended to be hereditary with children often taking up their parents profession. Formation of Jati was founded upon the acknowledgment of a notion that family traditions and upbringing have a significant and formative impact on the psyche of a child. That learning and building of lifetime habits begins from the cradle. In our present day society also we have enough data to validate this notion. In the K-12 education system in California notably, data is emerging showing a strong correlation between subject matter proficiency of the child and college education of parents. Family traditions are a reality and cannot be cited as oppressive or rigid and unbending. In our community, we continuously have people who cross a significant milestone of being the first in their family to attend college. This while the school constantly asserts that going to college is not a necessary criterion for successful education. Similarly there are families where the new tradition is of being first to not join armed forces. Societies are formed on traditions and with time they evolve and change. Singling out and presenting Hindu family traditions in a light that reflects adversely on Hinduism is a malicious attempt at eroding Hindu culture and is in violation of California state standards on social content.

The only difference between Jati in Indian structure and other parts of the world is that in Indian society Jatis formed into self-governing groups, with each group having representation and a voice in government. This aspect is manifesting in our country through special interest groups having highly paid lobbyists representing their interest in government. In Hindu society of Vedic period, they eliminated the need to hire and fund lobbyists. Each Jati got a

voice through representation. Hence this system provided social stability and gave an identity to each community. There was a **sense of pride in each Jati**, as there was some skill or ability they would excel at, or a special service they provided to society. The analogy in our country would be like community pride built through sports teams and mascots of a school. Each fan or a student feels a sense of pride with association, regardless of the ranking of the team or the school. Even today many Hindus are proud to associate with their Jati, whatever it might be, to the extent the family traditions are relevant to their present lifestyles. Having a voice through representation is neither a sign of oppression nor that of a rigid unbending structure. Jati, importantly is not a hierarchical social structure. However some social value could be given to it. New Jatis would evolve as the needs changed and societies regrouped. Can you say that in our society, in social circles we make no differentiation between a garbage collector and a brain surgeon? Does a garbage collector not add a very necessary value to society? One could correctly argue that society would function without brain surgeons but not without garbage collectors. Yet, social circles are what they are, and a brain surgeon is highly paid while a garbage collector is not in the present day United States. Blowing such aspects of other cultures and civilization out of context and out of proportion to a point it becomes the identifying character of a religion is plain wrong.

वर्ण **varṇa** is a classification based upon mental, intellectual and spiritual tendencies of a person and is not determined by birth. Varna is a wonderful Hindu concept designed to encourage people of different inclinations to work to their strengths and nature while keeping the four pillar powers of society namely Knowledge, Government, Wealth, and Manpower distributed to different groups, thus maintaining a social balance of power. Something our present day society could learn from where the problem is increasingly becoming whoever has money gets the best education and hence gets into powerful positions and controls the working class.

ब्राह्मण **brāhmaṇa** are those with strong intellectual qualities who are willing to sacrifice physical comfort but are uncompromising on intellectual ideals, dignity and moral values. They were the Rishis (Indian scientists), teachers, consultants and even priests. Brahmins tended to be highly respected in the society even though they were in overwhelming numbers - poor, lived lives lacking material comforts and often begged for daily food. **This was unique about Hindu society that Brahmins, even though poor and literally begged for their food often had a greater social respect compared even to the King, the monarch of the land or the Wealthy merchants.** Hindu society of the Vedic period was not a purely materialistic society. As a contrast to Europe and Middle-east, India was a civilization where Science did not have any conflict with Religion and both developed hand in hand, to such an extent that scientific debates and demand for justifications were an integral part of religious discourse. Differing views on religious interpretation were allowed and developed in harmony. Even today Hinduism does not have a hierarchical central clergy structure. Despite this Hinduism has a unified continuity and a central message, and this is because of the social structure and the respect given to the intellectuals. Vilifying the Brahmana is the colonial and proselytizing tactic, to erode the very backbone of Hindu culture.

क्षत्रीय kṣatrīya are those that have qualities of bravery in war, valor, standing up for social injustice, leadership skills, dedicating self for greater good, law and order. Kshatriyas would hold government positions, in the army or in law and order.

वैश्य vaiśya are those with an entrepreneurial instinct in trade, farming, animal husbandry, business and industry. Those with ‘fire in the belly’ for economic accomplishments, or producing economic goods. Vaishyas tended to be the most wealthy and prosperous of all the Varna. This is also unique about Hindu social structure in that the Kshatriyas i.e. the governing class with power was not the most wealthy, despite having the most governing power.

शुद्र śudra are those who dedicate themselves to developing individual artistic or physical skill with an inclination towards physical work, such as artisans, craftsmen or general workforce. They tend to have the most personal freedoms and the smallest code of “must do’s”.

Varna was not based on birth, and famous examples of the Brahmin Sages of Vyasa, Vishwamitra and Valmiki are cited who were all highly venerated Brahmin Sages but not born into Brahmin families. What is unique is that Vishwamitra who was a very rich and powerful Kshatriya king, gave up his kingdom and his wealth because he saw a greater calling to evolve and grow as a Brahmana and eventually became a venerated Brahma Rishi with no material possessions. We talk about Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the Hindu social structure was designed around it and perfected the science of the inner world while having significant accomplishments in the outer material world as well. Each was not just allowed, but entire society was structured to enable people to pursue their individual needs and wants while maintaining Dharma and a social order. While all people are created equal in the potential we can reach. We are all born differently in terms of our learning styles and things that appeal to us. We now know that forcing a left hand writer to learn to write with right hand is unnecessary and could stunt the inherent potential. Teachers are now recognizing that different students have different abilities to learn, some are visual learners, some are analytical etc. Hindu society simply took this acknowledgement and refined it further. It is malicious misrepresentation that Hinduism requires a person to be born in a brahman family to attain moksha. There are plenty of examples through Hindu history of plenty of saints and enlightened masters who were born in all the different Varnas and from various Jatis, thus proving that the social structure worked. People from all classes grew and evolved while following their respective traditions. Each Varna also pursued a different life-style based upon the **आश्रम āśrama** or the stage of life they were in.

The four **आश्रम āśrama** or stages of Indian society are: A) **ब्रह्मचर्य brahmacharya** – or life as a student, developing qualities of discipline and austerity, while gaining education and skills. Indian education system was very evolved in this era and some of the world’s earliest universities such as Taxashila and Nalanda were in India. Children from all classes had access to good education and the famous story of Krishna and Sudama illustrates how a prince and the poorest of poor studied in the same school and were best friends. B) **गृहस्थ**

gṛhastha – life as a householder. This is the stage of life where the individual lives his life and makes a career in his chosen field. C) **वानप्रस्थ vānaprastha** – Life of growing disengagement. This is the stage when people with worldly accomplishments make room to induct and ‘on-board’ the new generation into their respective careers. This system solves the need to have term-limits or to have special programs to induct the new generation into established roles. Famous example is from the Ramayana where King Dasharath upon noticing a single white hair in his reflection in the mirror, voluntarily resolved to hand over his kingdom by scheduling coronation of his teenage heir Shri Ramchandra of Ayodhya. D) **सन्यास sanyāsa** – This is the stage when an individual dedicates his life to union with God through God realization and enlightenment. A Sanyasi lives to the vow of dedicating his life for benefit of others because he realizes that everyone in the world is manifestation of the same God. Hence the only family a Sanyasi has is the world as one family.

Sanyasa and Brahmacharya are notably the two *ashramas* where the class distinction is largely dissolved or significantly minimized, reaffirming the Hindu foundational concepts of Adhyatma Vidya, of an inherent unity of all and a cyclic time line of creation and dissolution at the beginning and end of each persons lifetime.

The revised narrative on India, especially the section on 6th grade makes the reader believe that there was nothing of social or any other value to learn from the oldest living civilization on the planet. It presents a wrong notion that their social structure was inherently unfair and oppressive. This is not healthy attitude to teach our children especially in this global age, where Asia and India are re-emerging as significant centers in the world. We are talking about a civilization that has had an economic might almost 10 times that of the Roman Empire’s peak! A civilization whose culture influenced a significant part of the world without military force. Please apply the California state standards for social content to Hindus and people of Indian origin as well. Hinduism cannot be singled out for portrayal from an outsider’s perspective. From an absurd perspective.

6th grade is about introduction to Hinduism and there is enough to know about Hinduism without having to bring up the Hindu social structure in an absurd way. Please remove the Hindu social structure from 6th grade entirely, or do it in a way that does justice to it. Because of the sophisticated nature of the Hindu social structure, it deserves to be handled at High-school level where the various enabling aspects of this system can be understood for what they were. Please bring an immediate end to this injustice of singling out Hinduism for vilification through exclusively foreign interpretations.

Sincerely,

Tushar Pandya
Californiahindus.org